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We Have Never Been Acafans: Notes Towards a Posthumanist Approach to Media Fandom

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Abstract

Media fandoms highlight the power nonhuman actors have to move, shape, and perhaps even possess us. In stating, "I am a fan of this thing," we have already signaled a new state of being for ourselves rooted in a deep investment with something nonhuman. However, despite the foundational nonhuman entanglements of fandom, fan studies as a field has yet to engage in a sustained, comprehensive dialogue with posthumanism. In this article, I propose a theoretical vision for posthumanist fan studies, outlining how this framework would both compliment and complicate existing fandom scholarship and explicating an emergent, intra-active view of fandom. I then offer two potential methodologies that would prove useful in posthumanist fan studies research.

Keywords: *Fan Studies; Media Fandoms; New Materialism; Autoethnography*

Introduction

On March 16, 2023, I crawled out of bed in the early hours of the morning, put on a pot of coffee, and settled onto my couch to wait for exactly 3:00 a.m. EDT, the moment when Netflix would release the highly anticipated second season of one of my favorite series, *Shadow and Bone*. I proceeded to watch all eight episodes in one sitting, pausing only to order delivery from Dunkin' Donuts when the sun began peeking through the blinds of my living room windows. My experience with this series encapsulates a key element of my own fan identity, one shared by fans of many different kinds of media: a willingness to rearrange our schedules and behaviors for the sake of that media.

While fan studies scholars have explored these behaviors using a wide range of disciplinary approaches, they have not yet examined the objects of fans' investment on their own terms as *more* than mere objects. The things fans love have not yet been given their due as powerful nonhuman agents that become deeply entangled with human discourse, activity, and identity, a phenomenon clearly at work in my *Shadow and Bone* viewing practices. Although the series is certainly the product of human creativity and labor, it was not some*one* who compelled me to sacrifice my sleep schedule during my all-too-short spring break, but rather some*thing*—a story, a television show, a fictional universe. Even in fandoms centered on people—including musicians, actors, influencers, politicians, and athletes—fans are invested not necessarily in the celebrity as a human but rather in more-than-human things, such as the celebrity's oeuvre and curated persona.

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Media fandoms highlight the power nonhuman actors have to move, shape, and perhaps even possess us. The very act of calling oneself a fan represents the subtle but profound creation of an identity; in stating, "I *am* a fan of this thing," we have already signaled a new state of being for ourselves rooted in a deep investment with something nonhuman. However, despite how fandom relies foundationally on the involvement of nonhumans, fan studies as a field has yet to engage in a sustained, comprehensive dialogue with posthumanism (or its intellectual cousins) about the fundamental nonhuman entanglements of fandom. While some scholars have deployed posthumanist theories to discuss specific fan communities,[2] we have yet to imagine what a truly posthumanist approach to media fandom might look like.

In this article, I propose a theoretical vision for posthumanist fan studies, first explaining why I believe such an approach would be generative for the field. I then outline how this framework would both compliment and complicate existing approaches to fandom scholarship by explicating an emergent view of fan communities and identity. From this perspective, I argue that fandom is not a group of individuals with similar interests or even a set of fannish behaviors, but rather a phenomenon through which fan identity is intra-actively performed and produced. Finally, I provide a rough sketch of two potential posthumanist fan studies methodologies, showing how new materialist tracing methods and posthuman acafan autoethnography might illuminate creative and ethical ways of moving across the media landscape. Ultimately, my article provides a starting place and a call to action for further inquiry, offering a brief sample of how posthumanist frameworks might prove useful for research on media fandoms.

Why Posthumanist Fan Studies?

Before elaborating on a group of core premises that I envision for a posthumanist fan studies, I first want to address the usefulness of such an approach. On the most obvious level, as the nonhuman turn continues to reshape how we understand our material-discursive existence (including in and through the media landscape), of course scholars of media fandom should at least engage in conversation with posthumanisms and acknowledge wider theoretical shifts in the many fields that fan studies has emerged from. But my interest in this cross-pollination is not merely a desire to hop on a recent academic trend. Instead, I find foundational parallels between fandom and the discipline of fan studies, on the one hand, and posthumanist theories, on the other, leading me to see these two areas as especially suited to conversation with each other and even as already deeply entangled, even if those entanglements have not yet been articulated as such.

As I briefly describe above, there is something fundamentally nonhuman about the very phenomenon of fandom, given that fan identity results from a powerful encounter with some*thing* that reforms one's sense of self to include a relationship to that thing: *I'm a fan of that*. And, as I will continue to explore in the next section, there is also something about the porousness of fannish behaviors and experiences that mirrors posthumanist challenges to the traditional Western, humanist subject. The fan is a figure who allows and may even excitedly invite some kind of mediated Other—a story, a celebrity, a brand—further into their sense of self than Western rationality typically deems appropriate. Some fannish activities, like fanfiction and cosplay, move nomadically through media texts to borrow, combine, and reimagine existing pop culture materials, dislocating singular authorship and creating endless narrative multiverses. Henry Jenkins (1992) refers to these practices as "textual poaching;" more recently, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas and Amy

[2] See, for instance, Charlie Gere (2022) on posthumanism and *kawaii* aesthetics among *otaku* fan communities, Jessica Ruth Austin (2021) on posthumanist approaches to furry fandom, or Callum T. F. McMillan (2021) on posthumanism in sci-fi film and video game fandoms.

Stornaiuolo (2016) have proposed a framework of "restorying" to describe how fans—especially young fans—engage in "reshaping narratives to better reflect a diversity of perspectives and experiences" (p. 314), thus creating "infinite storyworlds" (Thomas, 2019, p. 156). These practices of distributed composition resonate with a posthuman conception of distributed subjectivity that "emerg[es] from and [is] integrated into a chaotic world rather than occupying a position of mastery and control removed from it" (Hayles, 1999, 291).

Importantly, neither fandom nor posthumanism is inherently progressive. Refusing to fully interrogate the contradictions of liberal humanism when navigating the posthuman condition can leave us stuck in a dualistic, negative quagmire (Braidotti, 2013), and trying to "graft" posthuman impulses, such as blurred boundaries between humans and technology, onto humanistic desires for mastery and a stable sense of self can lead to regressive transhumanisms that imagine a scientific future rather than an ethical one (Hayles, 1999, 286-7). Within fan studies, early scholarship tended to respond to negative narratives about fandom in both academia and mainstream culture—that fans were perverted, immature, and unworthy of serious study—by highlighting the subversive potential of fannish behaviors and the positive experiences of women and queer fans. However, this initial "Fandom is Beautiful" approach to scholarship[3] has given way to more nuanced frameworks in which the radical potential of some fan activities are enmeshed with practices of maintaining systems of oppression. Fandom may hold the possibility of disrupting top-down models of cultural storytelling hegemony, but both fandom and fan studies also perpetuate structural hierarchies of power, especially along lines of racial, linguistic, and imperial violence (Pande, 2018; Thomas, 2019; Morimoto, 2020). Additionally, just as fan studies scholars have ignored entire genealogies of critical thought on the practices of, for instance, African American fans (Wanzo, 2015), posthumanists have routinely failed to acknowledge Indigenous theories of nonhuman agency and entanglement that long predate the "ontological turn" (Todd, 2016; Rosiek et al., 2020). My point is not so much that fans and posthumanists are always inherently engaged in the same radical projects, but rather that there is something in the kernel of radical potential offered by both fandom and posthumanism that *rhymes*.

Posthuman Fannish Entanglements: A Few Broad Principles

The potential points of conversation between posthumanism and fan studies are numerous, which will become apparent throughout this section as I gesture at just a few of the possible avenues for future research. Certainly, with so many existing theoretical genealogies, definitions, areas of focus, and methodologies all congregating under the posthumanism umbrella, a posthumanist approach to fan studies could take on a number of vastly different forms—and I would be excited to see such forms proliferate in fan studies scholarship. However, I here argue for a specific vision of posthumanist fan studies that builds on a set of key premises from critical posthumanisms and new materialisms. I do not propose this framework as the only or best way to do posthuman fan studies, but rather as an approach that has proved particularly useful in my own thinking and which I believe will prove useful to others. Further, I present the principles below as WIPs (works-in-progress), to borrow a fanfiction term. They are rough drafts that I am still working through myself, and I welcome additions, revisions, and challenges.

[3] See Cornel Sandvoss et al. (2017) for a more extensive summary of the "Fandom is Beautiful" wave of scholarship and the transition to more complex frameworks.

Fandom as more-than-human

First and foremost, it seems crucial that a posthumanist fan studies acknowledges the more-than-human nature of fandom. While fandom is, of course, a phenomenon specific to human culture, it does not exclusively concern or involve human beings and in fact relies on the participation of nonhumans. This is not to say that fan studies up until now has ignored the nonhuman; on the contrary, there is a robust strain of materialist fan studies that attends to the nonhuman stuff of fandom. See, for instance, the special issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures* on "Materiality and object-oriented fandom" (Rehak, 2014), as well as scholarship on topics like toys and collectibles (Heljakka, 2017), physical locations of fan pilgrimage (Williams, 2020), fan bookbinding (Buchsbaum, 2022), and so on. Research on digital fan communities has also lent itself to examinations of both material technologies and digital/virtual nonhumans, including online fanfiction archives (De Kosnik, 2016) and cell phones (L. Bennett, 2017). Some of this previous literature already demonstrates posthumanist impulses by accounting for nonhumans as more than mere objects of human action, investment, and desire.

Moving to a more explicit, intentionally posthumanist approach involves adopting new materialist ways of thinking about fandom nonhumans, taking the stance that "materiality is always something more than 'mere' matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable" (Coole and Frost, 2010, 9). Following Jane Bennett (2010), we might pay attention to how "thing-power" functions within fandom, understanding nonhumans as active fandom participants themselves with vibrant and consequential lives worth studying on their own terms. Although Bennett's discussion of thing-power involves mostly "ordinary, man-made items" (xvi) and their "curious ability… to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (6), I here deploy *thing* as a much more capacious category, less materially bounded than *object* and flexible enough to account for nonhumans like systems, assemblages, narratives, and events. I draw on new materialist perspectives that do not make a fundamental distinction between the material and the immaterial, between the physical and the spiritual/virtual/conceptual stuff of the world (Coole and Frost, 2010, p. 10). In Karen Barad's (2007) terms, the material and the discursive are not discrete spheres of existence, and we must take care not to "write matter and meaning into separate categories" (25). Therefore, a posthumanist fan studies would take a broad view of nonhuman existence, considering not only action figures, signed photographs, computers, physical shrines, and DVDs, but also characters, intangible images, digital counterpublics, affective auras, and stories—as well as the ways in which *all* of those nonhumans operate in material-discursive ways.

Perhaps the most obvious example of thing-power in fandom is that exerted by various media on their fans. It's the pull of some*thing* that leads us to attend events, purchase merchandise, make art, get tattoos, post on social media, and—in my case—wake up before dawn for the singular purpose of consuming a story the moment it became available. But this is only the most obvious application; even just considering my experiences with *Shadow and Bone*, a plethora of other kinds of thing-power come to mind. For instance, watching the series on my phone materially changed the visuals I encountered (arguably for the worse, given the pixelation that occurs on such a small screen). I had financial, technological, and geographical access to food delivery that allowed me to watch without significant interruption for breakfast, but the embodied reality of living with a cat (and ADHD) also meant frequently going back to watch the same ten seconds over again to catch information I missed. In thinking outward to further places for inquiry into the vital role of nonhumans in fandom, I imagine examining, for instance, how the physical construction of a cosplayer's outfit might shape

their experience of a convention, how the tagging infrastructure of a fanfiction archive might perpetuate racism,[4] or how the absence of closed captions on a TV program might impact not only accessibility but also fans' interpretations of the story.

Fandom as emergent

Up until now, I have been speaking of fans and media, human and nonhumans, etc. as separate entities with the power to act upon or with each other—i.e., something nonhuman exerts thing-power on us, and we respond. But the reality, of course, is much more complex when thinking about fandom from a posthumanist perspective. A second broad principle for this approach, therefore, is to consider fandom as emergent, building on posthumanist theories of ontology, subjectivity, and agency. From this view, there are no discrete, preexisting fans, fan-beloved media, or fandoms. Instead, all of these emerge through intra-action (as opposed to *inter*action between established identities), a process through which "boundaries and properties of the components of phenomena become determinate and… particular concepts (that is, particular material articulations of the world) become meaningful" (Barad, 2007, 139). Intra-action is an ongoing phenomenon, a doing or performing that allows particular entities to become distinct even as they remain fundamentally ontologically entangled with one another.

As with the previous section, perhaps the most obvious application of this concept to fan studies is the relationship between fan and "fannish media"—a term I use here to specify those media nonhumans that have fans. Considering the fan/fannish media relationship as emergent and intra-active means acknowledging that neither fans nor the things they love are preexisting entities; rather, fans and fannish media are equally called into being through a process of intra-action. The fannish relationship emerges in a performance that simultaneously establishes the fan as a fan and the fannish media as fannish media. This is not an entirely novel idea within fan studies, and previous scholarship has explored the process of how individual and communal fan identities are constructed.[5] However, some of these existing accounts of fan identity explore how interacting with fannish media, communities, and behaviors *mediates* or *shapes* a fan's identity rather than *produces* it. Adopting a posthumanist framework of emergence allows us to consider how not only fan identity but also those fannish media, communities, and behaviors are all collectively produced through intra-active processes.

An emergent approach to fandom deserves a much more comprehensive theoretical figuration than I have space for here, but I will point towards some potential avenues for future scholarship. How might an emergent understanding of fannish subjectivity work to illuminate the intra-active, embodied experience of cosplaying a character, writing fanfiction, or attending a sporting event? If an emergent view of fandom means seeing agency not as the property of a specific person but rather as an active "doing" that arises within specific intra-active phenomena and allows for "changing possibilities of change" (Barad, 2007, 178), what does this mean for understanding fannish agency? How might this view of agency, for example, help restore collective responsibility for addressing the deeply racist structures of fan spaces rather than unfairly placing the agential burden of "curating your online experience" on fans of color?

[4] See Alexis Lothian and Mel Stanfill (2021).
[5] For just a few of many, many examples, see Mark Duffett (2013), Libby Hemphill et al. (2020), Agata Ewa Wrochna (2023), André Calapez et al. (2024), and Kashfia Arif (2022).

Fandom as phenomenon

An easy definition of "fandom" might posit that the term refers to communities of fans, whether specific communities of interest around a specific media text or object (e.g., Trekkies, Swifties, Yankees fans) or a more general community of fans who share some common practices and beliefs across their diverging media interests. I am certainly not the first to challenge this definition of fandom as consisting of people or groups of people—Matt Hills (2002), Jen Gunnels and M. Flourish Klink (2010), and others have described fandom as a kind of *doing* that must be performed. Even in popular parlance, fandom can also refer more nebulously to a culture or subculture, a set of behaviors, a way of seeing the world, etc. A posthumanist approach, however, points towards seeing fandom as a *phenomenon* in the sense articulated by Barad (2003), where phenomena are "dynamic topological reconfigurings/entanglements/relationalities/(re)articulations" (818).

From this view, fandom is a particular kind of entanglement of people and media (but which also necessarily involves actors beyond people and media). Fandom-as-phenomenon names the intra-active process that differentially produces fans and fannish media, a phenomenon that emerges as it is performed. While the entanglement of fandom is not always intentional—itself a contested (im)possibility for posthumanists—or even positive—as recent scholarship on anti-fandom[6] demonstrates—it does involve a particular orientation towards media, a "turning towards"[7] media texts, brands, and personas as fans are constituted in relational ways through entanglement.

This perspective overlaps with a recurring theme in fan studies, which is how fandom can challenge the liberal humanist subject. Scholars such as Francesca Coppa (2006) and Kristina Busse (2013) have previously noted the ways that fandom gets aligned with an excess of the physical and emotional, with femininity, with perversion, with disability, etc. Importantly, however, fans are not themselves an oppressed group under the rubric of Western hegemony and often participate in perpetuating that hegemony in violent ways. When fans do experience interpersonal or institutional mistreatment, however, it tends to occur as an extension of the same binary logics of traditional humanism that structure Western hegemony, a response to the ways that fans sometimes fail to adhere to a humanist ideal of white, masculine, abled rationality. Although the normalization of fandom in mainstream culture in recent years has meant less antagonism towards fans,[8] some of the negative stereotypes persist. The figure of the squeeing fangirl at a concert can still activate discomfort in part because she represents our own porousness, demonstrating how easy it can be for some*thing* outside of us to worm its way in and provoke a primal, affective response—the squee. Furthermore, she seems to *welcome* the entanglement with her fan object, excitedly participating in the phenomenon of fandom that not only prompts affective responses but (re)produces her identity as fan, challenging humanist values of the bounded, stable self who is—and should want to remain—master of his own existence.

This stereotypical fangirl is also almost always imagined as white, anglophone, and living in the Global North. Although she troubles a humanist concept of subjectivity, she is only visible because she is already figured as a subject in a racist, colonial humanist framework. Mainstream, academic, and fannish conceptions of fandom-as-phenomenon all hinge on who can be imagined as participating in—and thus produced as fans by—fannish entanglement. For instance, Olivier J. Tchouaffe (2010) notes that inaccurate portrayals of Africa as outside the realm of modern media

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[6] For instance, Dayna Chatman (2017), Jonathan Gray (2005), and Yessica Garcia-Hernandez (2019).
[7] My thinking on orientations is deeply influenced by Sara Ahmed's (2006) work in phenomenology, although a fuller exploration of the correspondences and tensions of Ahmed's work with this strand of posthumanism would take more space than I have here.
[8] See Sandvoss et al. (2017) for a brief overview of this change.

and technology contribute to the tendency of Western academics to erase and ignore African fandoms. In failing to imagine African societies that include media, Western fan scholars cut African fans out of their figurations of who has the potential to entangle with media and therefore become a fan.

Additionally, despite recent work on anti-fandom and the move to acknowledge more nuanced fan relationships with media, scholars still often assume that the default mode of fannish entanglement is positive and all-consuming. But as Rebecca Wanzo (2015) and Jillian M. Báez (2020) have noted, fans of color may experience more ambivalent, complex relationships with dominant media texts that misrepresent and marginalize them; such fans might participate in and emerge from a different kind of media entanglement. Understanding fandom as a phenomenon allows us to examine how both fans and scholars from dominant communities have imagined that phenomenon in particular, exclusionary ways. Future research might utilize a posthumanist lens to address how the overwhelmingly white, Western field of fan studies has assumed normative modes of fannish intra-action which produce only certain kinds of fan identities, objects, and communities, as well as how scholars might rethink the entanglement of fandom in more expansive ways.

Looking for Leia: New Materialist Tracing

In addition to sketching broad premises for a posthumanist fan studies, I would like to propose two potential methodologies that could prove useful to fan scholars working from a posthumanist perspective. These methodologies are not new; in fact, there are already fan studies scholars (and fans) who have employed variations or parts of these methods, even if they have not labeled them using posthumanist terminology. As with my premises above, I offer these methods as WIPs, inviting revision, expansion, and transformation.

The first of these methods draws from new materialist rhetorics, a field that sees nonhumans as rhetorical actors with the agency to affect the material-discursive processes of making meaning. In particular, I pull from the work of rhetoric scholars like Laurie E. Gries, who see the nonhuman *stuff* of the world—including images, technologies, texts, environments, and so on—as intra-acting with people and other nonhumans in consequential ways, variously producing (or inhibiting) communication, prompting emotional and behavioral responses, and rearranging us into new community formations. Working within the area of visual rhetoric, Gries (2015) developed a methodology called "iconographic tracking" for applying this new materialist perspective to the rhetorical power of images, a method that involves following a particular image as it moves through both digital and physical space and recording its complex impacts through thick descriptions. This method aims to be capacious and flexible, accounting for the "life" of an image as it transforms and circulates into an infinitely unfolding future.[9]

My own current research explores how new materialist rhetorical tracing methods might work in a fandom context, experimenting with tracking the lives of several different kinds of fandom nonhumans, including images, hashtags, and things more specific to fan communities, like ships.[10] In one of these case studies, I follow the movement of an iconic image of Princess Leia through fanzines[11] during the earliest years of *Star Wars* fandom (1977-1985). This image of Leia as she

[9] Other researchers have already taken up Gries's invitation to apply this method to other kinds of nonhumans beyond images; see, for instance, work by Dustin Edwards and Heather Lang (2018) that traces the life of the viral hashtag #YesAllWomen in a similar manner.
[10] Ship, short for relationship, refers to the imagined romantic and/or sexual relationship between two (or more) fictional characters or celebrities; it can also operate as a verb, meaning the act of demonstrating investment in that relationship: "I ship it."
[11] A zine, short for magazine, is a small-batch, amateur genre of publication that can range in content from informational to persuasive to creative. In fandom contexts, fanzines historically included letters of comment, analyses and reviews, fanfiction, fanart, and news; they

appears in *A New Hope*—in a white dress with her signature "space buns" hairstyle, wielding a blaster—continues to circulate in our contemporary visual discourse, often with political and feminist meanings attached. But Leia was not immediately and universally heralded as a feminist heroine upon her 1977 introduction to pop culture, and she was not necessarily overwhelmingly popular among fans, even in the female-dominated fan communities that tended to produce fanfiction- and fanart-heavy zines. Instead, Leia's character was the subject of intense negotiations that took place not only in letter columns and fanfiction but also through visual iconography.

To study these negotiations, I adapted the recursive steps of Gries's iconographic tracking process: collecting a large dataset of Leia fanart through archival research in the University of Iowa Special Collections and the fandom wiki *Fanlore*, identifying themes and connections within the dataset to show how Leia imagery circulated in consequential ways, and composing thick descriptions of the life of my target image (Leia's iconic white dress/space buns/blaster combo). In addition to adjusting Gries's digital methods to fit physical archival research, I also included another recursive step of self-reflexivity to account for how my positionality, embodied experiences, and investments as a *Star Wars* fan influenced the shape of my research. Building on the work of Indigenous scholars like Malea Powell (2008) on researchers' relationships to archives and Vine Deloria (1999) on recognizing our own relational embeddedness in the communities we study, I considered the life of this Leia image not as a preexisting path of data to follow, but rather a path intra-actively produced through my process of searching for it.

I have found that images of Leia in early *Star Wars* zines both catalogued and influenced the ongoing negotiations of how to interpret her character. Fan artists' depictions of Leia reflected some of the debates that were simultaneously taking place in fanzine letter columns, such as whether or not she was a spoiled brat or a courageous leader, whether she was a better romantic match for Han or Luke,[12] what her duties as a princess might have entailed, and if she could possibly be the "other" Yoda mentions at the end of *The Empire Strikes Back*—someone aside from Luke with the potential to save the galaxy (Nowakowska, 2001). Variations in Leia fanart mirrored those conversations through changes in her costume and hairstyles, placement alongside other characters, and so on, especially as that fanart was often juxtaposed with fanfiction, poetry, and analysis. But these works of fanart not only illustrated the ongoing negotiations of Leia's character; they also *participated* in the negotiations as rhetorical actors, contributing to the emergence of a complex, heterogenous Leia.

For example, even though many early images of Leia from Lucasfilm's marketing materials included a blaster and even though she wields two separate guns in *A New Hope*, weaponry did not become central to fannish Leia iconography[13] in the way that it did for other characters, like Han (blaster) and Luke (lightsaber). Her white dress and space buns became key elements of making Leia fanart legible to viewers, while the blaster remained secondary, thus reinscribing a less combative version of Leia for fanzine readership. Another recurring practice in fanart involved depicting Leia as sad, particularly in conjunction with fanfiction or poetry exploring her grief after the destruction of her planet, her loneliness in her multiple leadership roles, or her distress after Han is frozen in carbonite.

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were usually distributed via snail mail or at fan conventions for a small fee to cover printing and mailing costs. For large fandoms like *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, there were frequently hundreds of zines in circulation at any given moment, allowing fans to build a sense of community across geographical distance in a pre-internet era. Fans still create zines today, although they tend to do so now in digital formats. Those who do publish print zines are more likely to make small, easily reproducible zines that require only a few sheets of paper, unlike the fanzines that circulated before online archives became a possibility for sharing long-form fanfiction, which sometimes ran upwards of 100 pages.

[12] Prior to the reveal that Luke and Leia are twins in *Return of the Jedi*, she and Luke were a popular couple among fans, especially those who felt that Han and Leia's bickering was too antagonistic to ever become romantic.

[13] See E. J. Nielsen (2021) for a discussion of how fannish iconography operates and is developed in fanart and cosplay.

While Leia is only given a few moments to express sadness on-screen, the repeated visuals of mourning and solitude across fanzines helped to cement those as key elements of her character. Occasionally, letters of comment and zine reviews reveal moments when fans explicitly mention how Leia iconography impacted their understanding of her character or inspired them to imagine their own versions of her story. Fanart thus contributed to rhetorically *producing* Leia for those fan communities.

Other fan studies scholars can similarly adapt new materialist tracing methods, including Gries's iconographic tracking, to apply to other kinds of nonhumans in fandom. Furthermore, following a nonhuman through fandom spaces in order to imagine a new path through fan histories is not limited to academia. Annalise Ophelian's 2019 docuseries *Looking for Leia* performs a similar trace by seeking out stories about the deep affective connections female and non-binary *Star Wars* fans have with Leia. Although Ophelian may not use the language of new materialism, they are effectively tracking the circulation and transformation of a nonhuman entity—the character of Leia—as she intra-acts with fans across the globe in consequential ways. Their docuseries operates as both an act of fandom in and of itself *and* a kind of affirmative posthumanist theorizing that serves as an "exercise in shifting the traditionally cis male narrative of geekdom to tell the story from another set of perspectives" (Ophelian, 2023). Whether in traditional scholarship or beyond, new materialist tracing methods thus offer the potential for revising narratives of fandom to include the intra-active role of nonhumans.

We Have Never Been Acafans: Posthuman Autoethnography

Since the emergence of fan studies as its own academic discipline, the field has been haunted by questions about the role of the scholar in relation to the fans they study. When the scholar is an outsider to fandom, they might be met with mistrust and suspicion;[14] when the scholar is embedded in fandom, they run the risk of losing the critical distance that is—presumably—necessary for producing analysis. Often attributed to Jenkins, the term "acafan" (a mashup of academic and fan, sometimes written as "aca-fan") refers to the thorny hybrid identity of simultaneously being a fan and a scholar who studies fans (Jenkins et al., 2011). The sometimes contentious debates in fan studies history around the definition, utility, and proper deployment of acafandom have included discussions of the need for both academic and fannish expertise (Popova, 2020), the (in)ability of acafans to be critical of the media they love (Bogost, 2010), the tendency for acafans to create a canon of fandom scholarship based on their own tastes (Ng, 2010), and the questions of whether or not academia is fundamentally different from fandom in the first place (Coker and Benefiel, 2010). However, what most of these approaches have in common is an understanding of acafandom as a preexisting role—or the hybrid of two preexisting roles—that we as researchers can inhabit, reject, try to balance, or adjust as needed. The posthumanist position, however, sees acafandom as emergent in the same way that fandom—and academia—is emergent, called into being through intra-active processes.

[14] This was especially true in the pre-internet and early internet fandom eras, when fannish practices had a higher barrier of entry due to both technological and social factors and when pathologizing narratives of fandom in both mainstream culture and academia—as well as some particularly poorly-conducted studies—led some fan communities to distrust scholars who wanted to study their behavior (Larsen, 2021). However, even in a moment where technological access and cultural normalization have lessened some of that suspicion, a divide between fans and academics persists when, for example, non-fan scholars (or those perceived not to be "real" fans) attempt to conduct fan studies research and receive pushback. See, for instance, the controversy over a 2019 digital humanities fanfiction project as explored by Katherine Larsen (2021) or the experiences recounted by Daisy Pignetti (2020) studying online "Hiddleswift" fandom.

Some work on acafan autoethnography already points towards this perspective. Busse and Hellekson (2006) aim to shift away "from a dichotomy of academic and fannish identity to subject positions that are multiple… Our identities are neither separate nor separable" (24). Hills (2002) considers autoethnography as a method for negotiating the idealized imagined subjectivities of the rational academic and the passionate fan, which are frequently and problematically juxtaposed in a binary moral dualism. More recently, he notes that the process of self-learning through acafannish autoethnography is generative even though it may not—or cannot—result in a "singular and unified" understanding of the self (Hills, 2021, 151).

A posthumanist perspective pushes these ideas a step further: acafandom does not entail simply *occupying* inseparable identity positions or *uncovering* their contours through self-reflection, but rather constitutes a boundary-making practice, a performance that enacts and produces the division between fan and academic, thus allowing those identities to emerge. The negotiation of various roles—fan, academic, acafan—is the same intra-active process which creates and differentiates those roles. In this framework, acafandom is not something we *are* or even a predetermined function that we *do*; instead, acafandom is a fragmented and fluid phenomenon produced through the very act of trying to conduct acafannish research.

As Cécile Cristofari and Matthieu J. Guitton (2017) have noted, it is critical that we delineate acafandom not only in theory but also in practice, exploring specific research methods for deploying acafandom in ethical ways. While most acafannish praxis understandably concerns the logistics of ethnographic research, I propose posthuman autoethnography as a generative method for studying how acafandom emerges. This method would build on explorations of posthuman autoethnography from scholars like Poppy Wilde. Although autoethnography might seem like a strange choice for exploring a posthuman conception of subjectivity—in which the self is an emergent fiction deeply entangled with other humans and the nonhuman world—Wilde (2020) explains that this method proves useful in accounting for the intra-active formation of entangled subjectivity. Reflecting on, in Wilde's case, the intra-action between player and avatar in *World of Warcraft* allows Wilde to both study and perform a fluid, multiple "I."

Similarly, posthuman acafan autoethnography would provide space to examine how one's own acafannish subjectivity and behavior come to exist, without assuming either the fannish self or the academic self—or any self, for that matter—as a preexisting entity. Instead, such autoethnography would both describe and perform the emergence of the researcher's acafandom, producing differentiated fannish, academic, and acafannish roles in an ontologically entangled manner. This method would build on the way that fan studies scholars have already narrated their experiences of acafandom—negotiating issues like participation in fan spaces, transparency, confessional modes, interaction with survey participants, etc.—by explicitly reflecting on how acafandom emerges through those moments of negotiation as a particular way of being in the world.

I might, for example, perform an autoethnography reflecting on writing this article, thinking through how I navigated what to "confess" about my *Shadow and Bone* fandom and when to deploy more a fannish (rather than strictly academic) authorial voice, *producing* acafandom through those navigational choices that tried to distinguish my ontologically entangled fannish and academic identities. I could discuss the version of "me" that came into being through the intra-active process of composing this article, which involved me simultaneously being *composed by* the article, as well as by the sources I consulted, by the embodied experience of writing in a Panera, by the TV shows I watched to take a break from writing, by the helpful comments my acafan friends made on my draft,

and by my cat once again interrupting to demand attention. In writing this article, a new posthuman authorial voice—a new "I"—emerged, and with it, another iteration of acafandom was produced.

Posthuman acafannish autoethnography might also provide a space for fan studies scholars to reflect on how to engage in scholarly reciprocity not only with the human fans involved in their research (see, for example, Lee, 2021) but also with the nonhumans that are necessarily entangled in the process of producing acafandom. Jerry Lee Rosiek et al. (2020) note that Western new materialists lag behind Indigenous scholars in thinking about how to build ethical relations with both humans and nonhumans when conducting research, where nonhuman entities like the land and even stories themselves are active participants deserving of respect rather than mere resources to be exploited for knowledge. The work of scholars like Powell (2008) and Eva Marie Garroutte and Kathleen Delores Westcott (2013) might serve as examples for how researchers can reflect on—and ethically contribute to—their relationships with the nonhumans they study. Using posthuman autoethnography to explore what nonhuman entities are involved in the production of their acafannish subjectivity and research in the first place, acafans could take this opportunity to critically engage with Indigenous scholarship on ethical coexistence with nonhumans—not through appropriation of Indigenous practices but through consideration of what it means to intra-actively perform acafandom alongside nonhuman actors.

Despite the repeated suggestion that we jettison the concept of acafandom altogether, the continued conversations on the topic—and the way that the concept has already shaped many fan studies scholars' understanding of their own lived experiences—seem to suggest that acafandom remains a crucial component of our field. And if that crucial component is not merely something we are, a set of predetermined behaviors we do, or a dual allegiance we must balance, but is instead a phenomenon that emerges through the performance of anafannish research, posthuman autoethnography provides a useful methodology for understanding that phenomenon. Reflecting on the intra-active processes that produce acafandom will hopefully grant us a better sense of what acafandom, exactly, we are producing, and how we might go about producing it more ethically in the future.

A Prompt in your Ask Box

Given the nature of this article as a broad, initial sketch of what posthumanist fan studies might be, in lieu of a traditional conclusion, I will end by reframing my proposed approach in terms of a fannish practice that has been crucial in developing my own posthuman subjectivity: fanfiction. In a way, this piece is a work of academic fanfiction, exploring an alternate universe (AU) version of what the field of fan studies could look like: *what if we did a crossover with posthumanism?* I do not claim posthumanism as the only way forward for fan studies or even the singularly best approach, seeing it instead as one story among many possibilities. That story is also a work in progress, or perhaps merely an idea in progress, the skeletal outline of an endless AU that has already generated too many "plot bunnies"[15] for me to ever write myself. Therefore, I will deploy the time-honored fan practices of adopting out my plot bunnies—rather than allowing them to languish in my notes forever—and creating prompts to spark the imaginations of my fellow writers.

[15] Plot ideas that seem to reproduce like rabbits, generating more potential story ideas than the author has time to write.

I leave you with a prompt in your metaphorical ask box,[16] to do with as you please. I've specified the pairing I'd like to see depicted: posthumanism/fan studies. (It's a "scholar-ship," if you will.) I've described the canon divergence I'm interested in exploring, one in which fan studies doesn't rely on liberal humanist conceptions of subjectivity, agency, and binary logic. I've also suggested a few potential genres—new materialist traces, posthuman acafan autoethnography—but I'm open to other ideas. Otherwise, I don't have a lot of specifics in mind for what this kind of academic fanfiction could look like, so I leave it to the capacious posthuman imaginations of others: *What happens next?*

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[16] "Ask box" refers to a function on Tumblr for sending someone an "ask," which functions differently than a direct message in that the receiver of an ask responds publicly by publishing their answer as a new Tumblr post. In fanfiction circles, people will often send prompts as asks, requesting that the writer create a (usually short) work of fanfiction about a particular pairing or premise.

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